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UNCLAS VIENNA 003351

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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

OSD FOR COMMANDER CHAFFEE

WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KPAO](#) [AU](#) [OPRC](#)

SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: November 17, 2006

OeVP Ready to Return to Talks

11. The People's Party is ready to return to coalition talks with the Social Democrats, provided the SPOe agrees to a series of OeVP conditions. OeVP leader Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel announced his party's decision following a party leadership meeting Thursday. Like all Austrian media, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung reports on Chancellor Wolfgang Sch|ssel's announcement that the OeVP would resume talks with the SPOe after gauging public opinion. However, the OeVP has also issued the SPOe a series of conditions: The Conservatives' primary demand is that the SPOe refrain from outvoting the OeVP in parliament during coalition negotiations. It is unclear if the demand also applies to the current parliamentary investigative committees into the Austrian banking sector and the deal to buy 18 Eurofighter jets. It would, however, apply to a special session of parliament scheduled for Friday which will address efforts to raise state pensions. The OeVP wants an increase of 1.6 percent, while the SPOe wants an increase of 1.9 percent, writes the Wiener Zeitung. The Conservatives also want the Social Democrats to issue a joint statement recognizing Austria's right to defend its airspace. Additionally, they want a guarantee for the current system of bank secrecy and a clearer definition of the state's role in overlooking the banking sector. The two party leaders, Gusenbauer and Schuessel, will meet for talks later today.

Reactions to the OeVP's Decision

12. In a first reaction, SPOe leader Alfred Gusenbauer welcomed the OeVP's move, saying he was "pleased" the Conservatives were ready to talk again. However, Party manager Norbert Darabos said the OeVP conditions were "unacceptable." Meanwhile, the Greens, the Freedom Party and the BZOe are skeptical and suspicious about the OeVP's return to the negotiation table. SPOe leader Alfred Gusenbauer and floor leader Josef Cap welcomed the OeVP's decision to resume negotiations "on formation of a federal government based on a stable majority." Gusenbauer said he hopes the coalition talks can resume early next week, mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung writes. According to liberal daily Der Standard, however, party manager Norbert Darabos was less enthusiastic, warning that a "sort of veto right for the OeVP in the investigative committees is unthinkable for the SPOe." Greens leader Alexander Van der Bellen said: "In view of the OeVP's behavior up to now, we can only suspect that their latest decision, too, is just another tactical move aimed at squandering even more time," the Standard quotes. Similarly, FP0e leader Heinz-Christian Strache is skeptical of the "OeVP's tactical games," and said it is "high time

to talk about the real issues instead of personal views." BZOE boss Peter Westenthaler believes the OeVP's return to the negotiating table is just political logrolling. In his view, a grand coalition would be "bad for Austria."

Austrian Kidnapped in Iraq?

13. The Foreign Ministry in Vienna is looking into reports that an Austrian national has been kidnapped in Iraq. Following a Ministry crisis meeting last night, officials are trying to obtain more information from military authorities in Iraq.

Mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung writes that the Austrian Foreign Ministry has learned that a convoy with an Austrian among the guards was allegedly attacked by extremists near Basra yesterday and the Austrian kidnapped. The Foreign Ministry has contacted the British troops stationed in southern Iraq in particular, as well as American and German forces, to obtain detailed information on the issue.

ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal comments: "At this point, the Foreign Ministry is being cautious - so far, officials have only confirmed there are rumors of a kidnapping of an Austrian national in Iraq. (...) The Ministry has received information about the attack on a convoy near Basra from two parties in Iraq, a Ministry spokesperson said. At this point, however, the assumption is the information actually came from a single source in the Basra area. Currently, the Foreign Ministry is looking to ascertain whether the alleged kidnapping took place at all, and whether there really is an Austrian national among the victims."

Sudan Agrees to Joint Force

14. Sudan has agreed in principle to accept a joint UN-African Union force to defuse the crisis in its war-ridden Darfur region. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan says an agreement has yet to be reached

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on the number of troops to be deployed, but he was confident a deal could be achieved.

ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal reports that after Sudan agreed to a joint UN-AU force for Darfur, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stressed that most of the objectives at the conference on the crisis in the Sudanese region had been met. "The Security Council must have the confidence that what is being proposed is effective, and is workable. I think all of us at the meeting tried to achieve this objective and we have come a long way," ORF radio quotes Annan. Sudan had previously resisted the deployment of UN forces.

Iraq Kidnappings Continue

15. Iraq's Shiite-led government has ordered the arrest of the country's most prominent Sunni cleric on suspicion of terrorism. There are fears the move could further increase sectarian tensions, amid a series of kidnappings and killings this week. Two days after about 150 people were abducted from a Baghdad higher education facility, about 60 Iraqis traveling in six minibuses were kidnapped and killed in the Iraqi capital yesterday. After the kidnapping by gunmen of about 150 Iraqis from a Baghdad higher education facility earlier last week, Iraq's Higher Education Minister said he fears the remaining hostages may have been tortured and killed. There have been conflicting reports as to how many people have been freed and how many still remain in the hands of their captors, ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal says. Meanwhile, many Iraqis are leaving the capital in the face of the current series of kidnappings and killings, according to independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten. The daily describes as "anarchy" the most recent developments, with armed militiamen dragging civil servants out of their offices or randomly hijacking buses in broad daylight. Three-and-a-half years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, the extent of the violence in the country is apparent not only because of the "spectacular mass kidnappings and beheadings, but also through the both gruesome and absurd stories of criminal gangs and terrorism by militia groups, which do not even make the news," the Salzburger Nachrichten argues.

Landmark Deal with India

¶6. The US Senate has approved a controversial landmark deal with India to provide civilian nuclear technology and fuel. In return, India has to open up some, but not all, of its nuclear facilities to international inspections.

President George Bush has been fighting for a long time to get the legislation on US support for India's nuclear technology passed. The agreement is part of a deal he negotiated with the Indian Prime Minister during his visit to New Delhi in March 2006. In a White House statement, Bush described the US-Indian relationship as a "strategic partnership, based on shared values." The Senate's approval would provide the citizens of two great democracies with energy, assistance in nuclear non-proliferation, and trade benefits, the statement continues. However, the bill still has to clear a number of hurdles before it becomes law and can be implemented. ORF online news explains that although India has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Senate vote will facilitate US cooperation with the Asian nuclear power on the civilian use of atomic energy.

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